



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Fifth Sunday of Lent A



“Raising of Lazarus”

by Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1310-1311 public domain.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Prayer in Preparation for Baptism and in Preparation for Renewing Baptismal Promises

Almighty God, who rules all things,
we hasten with eager steps to the venerable font of eternal salvation,
and ask you, Magnificent God,
that you command this font which has been sealed
may be reopened with the keys of your mercy,
and impart to those that thirst a most sweet cup of water.
May the voice of your divinity sound upon these waters,
may the Spirit of your sanctification dwell therein
and bring healing to all ill.
May the abundant streams of paradise flow from it,
that by your goodness heavenly graces
may be bestowed upon these new-born children.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Liber Ordium. *Monumenta Ecclesiae Liturgica*, edd. Cabrol and
Leclercq, Vol. 5, ed. Dom M. Ferotin, Paris, 1904.

Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent.
- ▶ Today we experience one of the *signs* in John's Gospel. John calls them signs rather than miracles because they point to and reveal the identity of Jesus Christ—his life, mission, identity and destiny. The *signs* call people to deep, intimate and lasting faith in Christ.
- ▶ Today's gospel reminds us that only God has the power over life and death.
- ▶ Jesus was victorious over sin and death. This Gospel is a prelude to the cross. Lazarus was raised for a brief time. He would one day die again. Jesus, on the other hand, was raised forever. He is the Resurrection and the Life. This Gospel is intended to bring people to that awareness.
- ▶ The elect are preparing to plunge into the baptismal waters--to die to sin and to be born again in the Spirit and in Truth. The third scrutiny is their final penitential celebration that seeks to uncover what is still defective in the elect and thus heal and restore it---to bring life where death once reigned. The lasting effects of sin are submerged in the pool of new and everlasting life—the waters of baptism.
- ▶ Scrutinies are celebrated with those who are preparing for baptism (elect) at the Easter season. There are three scrutinies. The first scrutiny is celebrated on the Third Sunday of Lent, the second scrutiny is celebrated on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, and the third scrutiny is celebrated on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Scrutinies are penitential celebrations that help uncover what is still in need of reconciliation and healing in the elect as they prepare for baptism. Cycle A readings are used for the celebration of scrutinies. If a scrutiny is celebrated today it is the third in the series—the Third Scrutiny.
- ▶ The Lord's Prayer is presented to the elect during the Fifth Week of Lent. The presentation of the Lord's Prayer prepares the elect to become an adopted child of God through baptism—to call on God as Father for the first time in the Eucharistic liturgy when we all pray the Lord's Prayer together in preparation for our reception of Holy Communion.
- ▶ For a more thorough treatment of today's liturgy refer to *Word and Worship Workbook, Year C*, Mary Birmingham, Paulist Press, 176-184.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group. (@Five to seven minutes)

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings. (You may want to concentrate on the Gospel alone.)

First reading: Ezekiel 37; 12-14

- ▶ Ezekiel prophecies of the dry bones that come to life through the power of God.
- ▶ Ezekiel was a priest and prophet in Israel. He was deported to Babylon and held in captivity along with all the other Israelites.
- ▶ The Israelite people were in despair. They believed their captivity was a result of their lack of faithfulness to God. God had exacted retribution in the form of their present suffering.
- ▶ So hopeless was their situation that only God could change it. Their dreams and hopes seemed dashed and gone.
- ▶ Ezekiel insists that their dreams were not crushed--God would one day be faithful to his promise for a restored monarchy, the temple, and the Promised Land.
- ▶ Regardless of their transgressions God was faithful and steadfast in his love of them. Even though the people broke their covenant with God, God's love was faithful and true.
- ▶ Ezekiel's vision depicts God restoring the people of Israel. Israel is portrayed as dry, lifeless bones, lying listless on the dusty earth. Dry, dead bones could only come to life by the power of the Almighty.
- ▶ God breathes his Spirit and new life into those bones. They come to life; they are restored. Only God has the power to save Israel in the face of utter death and destruction. Only God has the power to save any of us.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ What is the most hopeless situation you can think of? Do you really believe God has the power to breathe new life into that situation?
- ▶ What sin in our life could cause the kind of devastation of which Ezekiel speaks?

Second Reading: Romans 8: 8-11

- ▶ God forgives and forgets people's sins.
- ▶ Paul reminds us that God forgives and forgets the sins of his people.
- ▶ People dare not put their trust in their own efforts to follow the law. We will always fall short. God's redemption is completely free and unmerited.
- ▶ Jesus' freed us once and for all from the perpetual effects of sin.
- ▶ Paul holds up a mirror for us. He begs us to see ourselves as God sees us—

- loved, forgiven and a child of God.
- ▶ Jesus did not come to establish new laws or codes of conduct. The law is a guide to follow out of love for God. The law guarantees nothing. Scrupulous adherence to the law does not reserve a place for us at the eternal banquet table.
 - ▶ The only law that Jesus came to establish is the law of love—love God with heart, mind and soul and love one another and self as God loves us. All else is secondary to the Great Commandment.
 - ▶ God created us in God's image. We are elevated to the status of divine because Christ sanctified all human life by taking human form.
 - ▶ We are sinners, however, in need of redemption.
 - ▶ We cannot be saved on our own merit; we are saved by God's gratuitous love for us.
 - ▶ The primary Christian agenda is to live the Paschal Mystery—to participate in Christ's mission, his life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit. When our participation in the Paschal Mystery is the driving force in our lives we are living as the new creation we were meant to become.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ What does it mean to you that we cannot merit God's saving love?
- ▶ Look in the mirror that Paul holds up for you. Do you see yourself as forgiven? As loved? As a child of God? If you truly believed that you are forgiven, loved and God's child, what are the implications for the way you live your life?

Gospel: John 11: 1-45

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?

- ▶ Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.
- ▶ Today's sign was intended to bring people to faith in Jesus. It is no wonder the chief priests stepped up their efforts to have him executed. Jesus was having an impact—people were turning to him in faith. Jewish people were starting to follow him. This unnerved the religious leaders.
- ▶ The raising of Lazarus is the catalyst that set Jesus' death in motion.
- ▶ The raising of Lazarus demonstrates definitively that Jesus is the one some say he is---the long awaited Messiah. Jesus has the power to open the gates of eternal life.
- ▶ Jesus waits four days before going to his friend Lazarus' aid. He wants to make sure he is very, very dead! He also wants to make sure the people realize that the miracle is God's initiative—that it was not a case of Jesus bending to applied pressure from the friends and loved ones of Lazarus'. Lazarus was truly dead. The rabbis taught that life and breath hovered over the dead body for three days. Thus, by the fourth day Lazarus was as dead as those dry, brittle bones.
- ▶ Here is a case in which all hope is gone---death prevails and hovers like a rain soaked moldy blanket teetering on unstable tent stakes. The stench of death!
- ▶ All disciples face the mortality of death—all—even Lazarus---would ultimately die. However, all disciples face the hope of eternal life.
- ▶ Jesus shows deep emotion. Some scholars say the level of his emotion makes no sense since he knows he is going to raise Lazarus from the dead. They insist that Jesus' emotion was utter grief and anger over the hopelessness of illness, the separation of death, darkness, sin and evil.
- ▶ Jesus calls on his Father in prayer demonstrating for the people that his power and authority come from God.
- ▶ Some people were amazed beyond words and other conspired to have Jesus executed.
- ▶ The religious leaders believed that Jesus' ministry would bring the secular powers down upon the Jewish religion. At least that is what they said. In truth, they were afraid of their own authority being undermined. Their plotting was a self-serving, self-preserving action.
- ▶ Tension existed between John's community and the Jewish community. The Jews expelled the Christians from the synagogues. The old purification, water, healing and temple rituals gave way to new Christian ritual.
- ▶ John's gospel is an invitation for us to examine our lives and see where we would find ourselves in the Jesus controversy. Would we find ourselves with those who are awe-struck at what we just witnessed—affirming unshakeable belief in Christ, the Messiah and Savior, or would we think him an interloper, a person who might bring undue attention by the secular authorities upon our community, thus needing to be eliminated.
- ▶ We often think that we would be first in line to follow him. However, Scripture Scholar Raymond Brown is quick to point out that many of the enemies of Jesus were law-abiding religious people who thought they were

doing the right thing---they thought they were protecting Judaism.

- ▶ We need to ask ourselves: Are we open to the voice and works of the prophets in our midst or do we dismiss them as lunatics or on the fringe?
- ▶ Jesus makes us heirs to eternal life. He died on the cross; rose again and thus opened the gates of salvation.
- ▶ He invites us to have radical faith, yet the decision is ours. We can choose life or we can choose death.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ If you were to ask Jesus to come and unbind an area of death and darkness in your life what would that be?
 - Do you struggle with uncontrolled addiction (your own or that of a loved one)?
 - Do you or anyone you know and love struggle with illness that seems out of control and hopeless?
 - Have you ever heard of God unbinding a truly hopeless situation?
 - What does that teach us about God and about hopeless situations?
- ▶ What is the challenge of this Gospel? In what way does it invite you to grow in faith and to be a better disciple?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

Concluding Prayer

Option 1. Celebrate a minor rite—an exorcism or blessing for catechumens: RCIA 90-97

Option 2. Pray the Prayer of Pope Clement

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.

I trust in you: strengthen my trust.

I love you: let me love you more and more.

I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.

I worship you as my first beginning.

I long for you as my last end.

I praise you as my constant helper.

And I call you as my loving protector.

I want to do what you ask of me:

In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.

Let me love you Lord as my God.

And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.

A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.

APPENDIX

1. A dear friend embezzled money from the Department of Children and Families, killed the co-worker who could implicate her in the embezzlement and then took her own life. There were no dry dead bones into which life could be breathed. Where is Ezekiel's hope-filled prophecy when it comes to a situation of such hopelessness?

My friend lost hope and ended her life. She could not accept the God of last chances. However, the new life that emerged out of the ashes is the lesson she taught those she left behind. She taught us that we can all very easily get caught up in distractions and material things that keep us from focusing our life and attention on God and things of God. When her story unfolded before our eyes and ears and the horror settled in, we all realized that we are one bad decision away from taking a similar path. She was a reminder to us that we are all sinners--we can all go astray—we can all get caught up in things that are death-dealing rather than life giving. Ezekiel reminds us of God's faithfulness in spite of our sinfulness. There is no sin beyond God's redemption. Ezekiel is a messenger of hope in the midst of despair and the ravages of hopelessness.

2. The human condition is such that it is very difficult to believe that there is nothing I have to "do" or become" so that God will love me. It is part of our DNA to think we must earn salvation even though that was long ago denounced as heresy.

If I truly embraced—not just believed—but embraced and lived the truth that I am freely, gratuitously loved, saved and forgiven—then I would not spend so much time massaging the ego. My human, sinful self constantly repeats the mantra that I am not good enough for God. The truth is none of us is good enough for God—it is not about being good enough. It is about being loved in spite of our sin; being forgiven of that sin; and being saved regardless of that sin and being given the courage and the strength to avoid the sin in the first place.

Someone once accused me of not being "spiritual" enough because I did not belong to her prayer group. Nonsensical as that was, her accusation fed into my own insecurities about worthiness before God. I will not be judged by how many prayer groups I attend. I will be judged by how I love the people that God puts in my life.

3. *God of all hopelessness.* I remember celebrating the third scrutiny with a young woman whose mother told her that she would be forever cut off from her family if she made the decision to be baptized in the Catholic Church. Her mother believed her daughter was about to lose her eternal soul. I was given the privilege of suffering with this beautiful, heart-sick candidate for baptism.

The young woman was prepared to give up everything to follow Christ within the context of Catholicism. After the celebration of the Second Scrutiny she became acutely aware of the blindness in her family and the seeming hopelessness of her situation. She wept, “How can I ever return home after all that has happened? I hate my mother for rejecting me. On the other hand, I desperately want to live my life as a Catholic—I want to receive Christ in the Eucharist. I want to be fed at his table. How can I go forward with such hate in my heart?”

The Fifth Sunday of Lent arrived and we celebrated the third scrutiny with her. As she celebrated her third and final scrutiny she asked to be freed from the hatred and rage she was harboring. She put her family in God’s hands. She was confident that she had made the right decision.

In her mind the situation with her family was as dead and hopeless as the tightly bound Lazarus. We prayed with her and for her. She asked to be freed from her rage and the hatred she was feeling for her mother. “What real mother rejects her child, her only daughter?” she tearfully asked us.

We gathered for a retreat on Holy Saturday morning. This beautiful young woman was prepared to enter those waters of new life unsupported by her family of origin, but fully supported by her new family in faith.

A package came to the church. It was addressed to this young woman. Inside was a brand new bible. The inscription on the inside was, “I don’t understand what you are doing. I have prayed about it and I believe God has chosen a far different path for your life than for ours. But please know that I love you and am sorry for rejecting you. I will be with you in spirit. Mother.

God breathed his Spirit into the dry, dead bones of that situation and began the process of reconciliation. Later in the Easter season the woman witnessed to our parish community about the power of Christ and his reconciling work in the life of her family. She will never forget the power of Jesus Christ who continues to unbind us from his throne in heaven.

This young woman’s story is a reminder to us that when we allow God to unbind us, miracles still happen. The dead are brought back to life. Hopeless situations have new life breathed into them.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

*Eschatology, Heaven, Hell and
Purgatory
Cross/Paschal Mystery*

*Sacrament of Reconciliation
Miracles
Revelation Part I*

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the index of doctrinal topics and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

ESCHATOLOGY, HEAVEN, HELL, PURGATORY

Jesus brings Lazarus back from the dead. Lazarus will die again in the future, but for now Jesus demonstrates his power over life and death—the power he ultimately demonstrates by his death and resurrection. The Gospel is a reminder that Jesus opened the gates of heaven for us and made eternal life with God a possibility for all of us. Thus, today's extended session will address the Church's teaching on last things and the afterlife.

CROSS/PASCHAL MYSTERY

Today's Gospel is a prelude to the passion and death of Christ. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, setting in motion plans to have him executed. He raised Lazarus to life demonstrating his power over life and death, a power he would ultimately demonstrate by his sacrifice on the cross. Thus today's session will focus on the Cross and Paschal Mystery of Christ.

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

Lent is a time we focus on the areas of sin in our lives and our need for God's mercy. It is also a time when the church offers multiple opportunities to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. The sacrament of reconciliation brings us out of the darkness into the Light of Christ. There is no sin greater than the power of the risen Christ. Jesus unbinds us in the sacrament of reconciliation. The sacrament of reconciliation continues Jesus' reconciling, healing ministry for us today. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION.

MIRACLES

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead—one of the seven signs in John’s Gospel. John uses the term *signs* instead of miracles as the miracles in John’s Gospel were intended to point to the identity and mission of Christ—the Divine Lord. Today’s session will focus on what the church teaches about miracles.

REVELATION

Today’s liturgy is a proclamation of divine revelation. Jesus demonstrates his power over life and death. There are many ways God reveals God’s self to us—we call that revelation. Today’s session will focus on what the Church teaches about REVELATION.